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Hey Buddy – Need a Fix?

The basis for this column is an event that happened to my family – and it started out as a far cry from anything computer related. My daughter had a sports injury last summer. She is a distance runner on her school's track team. As luck would have it, there was a sports-medicine specialist at our hospital. We first visited our primary provider, who referred her to the sports-medicine specialist. We visited the specialist, who gave amazingly useful advice to my daughter on how to cure and prevent this type of injury in the future. As we were leaving the doctor, he told us to be sure to make a follow-up appointment with him in two or three weeks.

After a few weeks had passed, I called the local appointment line to make my daughter's follow-up appointment. I was told that she couldn't make an appointment with the specialist until she once again saw her regular provider, and he made yet another consultation referral request. I realized the wasted effort of arguing with the appointment clerk (who, it was apparent, was reading off of a prepared script). However, I pointed out to the clerk that my daughter's prescriptions were to expire shortly, and an appointment and referral would take another week. It was just as futile asking her help with the prescription refill dilemma. Finally, I gave up and asked, "Who can I talk to that will be able to handle my problem?" She gave me the name and

number of Fred (name changed to protect the innocent).

I quickly called Fred, who agreed that the appointment process would not let us make a direct follow-up with a specialist, only with our primary care provider. However, Fred said that he had ways around the problem. Two clicks on the computer, and BANG! It now appeared that the specialist was my daughter's primary care provider. The computer, now happily digesting this piece of (incorrect) data, scheduled an appointment for us with the specialist for later on in the day. After all the appointments with the specialist were over, all we had to do was call Fred one more time, and he would adjust the database so that the specialist was no longer listed as the primary care provider.

Breathing a sigh of relief, I realized that I had just talked to a fixer. A fixer is a person who is able to fix a broken or unwieldy process and make it meet user needs. Now, as I am sure you will recognize, a process evolves over time. The appointment process at our hospital originally allowed the appointment clerks to make appointments with any doctor. However, too many people abused the system by requesting a specialist without a prior consultation with a general practice doctor. ("Hello, appointment clerk? I have a headache, and I just know I have terminal brain cancer, so please schedule me an appointment with a neurosurgeon.") So the new system totally pro-

hibits appointments to specialists. The problem is that there are some times when special actions have to be taken in violation of the current process. Enter the role of a fixer.

There is nothing wrong with having a fixer, as long as the fixer is able to make the process better over time. Fred freely admitted that the current process was too restrictive, and told my wife and me to drop by when we were at the hospital and fill out a patient advocate action request form (formerly known as a complaint form). Fred said he helps collect and review these forms, and they use them to suggest changes to the current process.

Does your process have flaws? Of course it does! Can you find a way around them yourself? If so, then you need to work to make the process more workable. If you can't find a way around the process yourself, you might have to resort to a fixer. Just make sure that the fixer is working to constantly improve the current process. If the fixer just fixes and moves on the process will become more and more broken over time.

— David A. Cook, Ph.D.

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P.S. By the way, CROSSTALK is always looking for BACKTALK authors. If interested, e-mail and we'll fix you right up.

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